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AUTHOR	Miyao, Mariko
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ABSTRACT

This paper argues that computers can be a useful tool for encouraging students to be active and independent learners, particularly in language learning. The key is to find appropriate activities and content to motivate students to learn actively and independently. Access to computers may present challenging obstacles for some teachers (supply, quality), but their use is worthwhile and should be pursued. Using e-mail, the World Wide Web, and courseware can be very effective in the second language classroom. This paper specifically introduces a children's story-writing project that used courseware, called "Study Note," as an example of student-centered language learning. After observing the students work to make their own stories, it is concluded that computer use is highly effective for motivating students in language learning, much more so than was anticipated when this project began in 1996. The result is due largely to the use of simple material, such as a children's story, and appropriate software that simplifies technical procedures for students. Support from teachers and technical support staff is also crucially important to maintain student motivation and interest in learning English. (KFT)

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Running Head: COMPUTERIZED STORY WRITING PROJECTS

Computerized Story Writing Projects for Student-Centered Language Learning

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Mariko Miyao

Computer Science Department, Junior College Division

Tokyo Kasei Gakuin Tsukuba Women's University

3-1 Azuma, Tsukuba, Ibaraki 305-0031, JAPAN

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Abstract

There is no doubt that computer use can be quite effective to make your students active and independent learners, particularly in language teaching and learning. The key is to find appropriate activities and contents to motivate students to learn actively and independently. However, many teachers are reluctant to use computers in their classroom teaching. That may be because very few computers are available in the first place for language teaching even at educational institutions. Or teachers may have to spend much time trying to deal with technical problems rather than concentrating on the contents of computer use. Despite all these obstacles, the author believes that computer use is worthwhile, based on various opportunities using computers, such as e-mail, WWW, word processors and other software programs in language teaching. This paper specifically introduces a children's story writing project using groupware called Study Note as an example of student-centered language learning.

Key Words: computer use, groupware, multimedia authoring software, student-centered language learning, writing projects

Computerized Story Writing Projects for Student-Centered Language Learning

The most important goal for language teachers is to help students express their thoughts in the target language. However, it seems like a formidable task especially when you teach low-level learners because they are not used to writing even a very short sentence without feeling timid and awkward.

On the other hand, students are usually very enthusiastic about tackling projects using computers. By introducing various reading and writing activities using networked computers such as groupware and the Internet, students will gradually realize that they can use computers to communicate with people not only in Japan but also all over the world. This way they are given a real purpose to learn English.

As a typical example of student-centered writing projects using computers, this paper focuses on a story writing project using groupware which has been offered to junior college students majoring in computer science.

In the story writing project, students create their own stories for small children with graphics and sound. They can become very creative because for small children they feel that they may develop their own ideas without using complicated English expressions. In the process of creating stories, students realize that they have a real audience because they can show their stories with the groupware and later in the WWW, and simple English becomes a real tool for them to communicate with a wide range of people.

Creating children's stories with multimedia authoring software or groupware has turned out to be quite effective. Computer use itself can provide good opportunities for communication between teachers and students. Furthermore, computers can bring the outside world to the classroom, by encouraging students to learn English more actively and independently. You as a teacher can also encourage your students to engage in interactive and collaborative learning by using computers, while accommodating their varied learning styles and paces of learning (Beller-Kenner, 1999, p. 369; Lasarenko, 1997, p. 5).

Children's Story Writing with Groupware

As an example of student-centered language learning, which is most effective in

motivating students to learn independently and which provides good opportunities for communication, this paper introduces a children's story writing project which utilizes groupware.[1] In this activity students are asked to write a simple children's picture book, similar to a *kamishibai* (a picture-story show), in order to encourage them to use their own ideas and write easily and with less anxiety.

To maximize the benefits of this kind of simple writing project, it is important to use a program which enables students to write and draw without complicated procedures. For this purpose, groupware called Study Note[2] has been utilized because it has the capability and characteristics of multimedia authoring software. It has been available to the students in our department to use with Windows machines, where "StudyNote for Windows" is the name of educational groupware for LAN (intra-school network) and designed to develop student ability to communicate and exchange opinions among peers using the network. The results of their writing, if saved in the database area of the groupware server, can be read by many people inside as well as outside of the university.

According to Healy (1999), some characteristics of multimedia authoring software are as follows:

1. It is interactive, easy to use and enjoyable.
2. You can create, import and display text, graphics, animations, video, sound, etc.
3. End-users can use the mouse to change screens, view graphics, play sounds, etc.
4. It has nonlinear, branching ability (called "jumping").
5. It is user-friendly (easy to learn) software. (pp. 408-411)

Study Note has been utilized for this project partly because it is available to the students in our department and it was recommended by one of the designers/developers of the software to the author when other CAI software was being used for the same project. Also the students in this project are computer majors and are willing to tackle tasks using various computer software. However, you can utilize any other types of software, groupware, or authoring software for the same effects. The purpose is to motivate students to write their own stories in English. Therefore, depending on how much time you can spend for this kind of activity, or what kind of computers are available in your teaching environment, any word processing software with some graphics capability or presentation software, such as PowerPoint, can be used for a

similar effect.

This story writing project has been used with a small group of second-year students (usually ten to fifteen students) (in graduation project courses (*sotsugyou kenkyuu*) for the last couple of years). While teaching the content, the teacher can gradually acquire some basic technical knowledge of the software and the networked computer in use, which he or she can apply to other language learning activities later as well.

Procedure

1. Collecting ideas

At the beginning of a semester, ask students to collect ideas about stories they wish to write. Students can usually come up with their own ideas about writing stories. For example, a student may wish to write about her dog's childbearing experience with illustrations and photos of her dog and puppies. Another student may want to write a story using an old Japanese fairy tale with a new twist given to the story in the middle through hypertext (if you click a button depending on your choice, you can branch into two or more different stories).

2. Learning to use the software

Teach students how to use the software. Study Note has several useful features. For example, drawing and painting tasks can be performed simply by using a mouse, and writing letters in different sizes and colors is quite easy. Study Note is designed so that even elementary school children can manage to use the software, and some students who are more comfortable in using other drawing/painting software, such as Paint, can easily obtain their drawings from such software and add it to the Study Note capability. After writing the story, students can also record narration, background music or any other sounds. A reader can just click on a sound button to listen to what was recorded.

3. Forming groups

Ask students to form groups. Some students write individually and others like to work in a pair or in a group. For example, in 1999, out of 11 students, there were groups of four, two, and five individuals. Among five students working on an individual basis,

three made one more story together. Some of those students were not necessarily enthusiastic about learning English in the beginning, but just because they liked to create stories with graphic images and sounds, they were soon well motivated to write in English. This year (in 2000), all eight students have been working individually to create various types of stories.

4. Writing stories

Ask students to start writing stories. It is important to check their progress regularly in the computer room. Ask them what they want to accomplish in each class hour to maintain their motivation and interest. Some students write their stories first and some others write stories and draw pictures at the same time. Some write the stories on paper and some others start writing into the computer. Most of the students write in Japanese first and then translate their work into English. Stories, when completed, are bilingual in English and Japanese and readers can click on a jump button to switch from one language to another.

5. Checking the contents

Check the content of the story of each student or each group. Most students write in a regular sequence, but some students write game-like stories by jumping to different pages with different plots depending on a reader's choice. In any event the teacher should check not only the grammar but also how the story develops.

In the process of writing a story in two languages, your students often realize that they cannot always translate from one language to another without considering different cultures and different ways to express. For example, some jokes, especially puns, cannot be translated from Japanese into English without losing the same meaning or impact. Then they become aware that jokes or puns are often specific to one culture or language. When they write about how animals sound or cry, they realize that English expressions are quite different from Japanese ones. If they were passively learning in the language classroom, they might not notice differences and similarities between the two cultures and languages.

6. Setting a goal

Set a goal and a deadline with students. At the beginning of this project, it is made clear that the goal of this writing project is to show their results at the college festival held in the fall (usually late October). Having the deadline and potential outside readers motivates students to be creative and to work hard (Healey, 1999, p. 120).

7. Recording of the narration

Ask students to record their narrative sections and save them in WAVE or MPEG files before importing them into Study Note. Students practice reading aloud as they realize that it is important to speak clearly for their readers. Also ask them to edit a story segment on each page for reading aloud if it is too long to be recorded into a sound file. Sound or audio files tend to get very large by consuming a lot of computer space. For this reason, an MPEG file, which is a compressed version of a WAVE file, is better if your students want to record long passages read aloud by themselves.

Study Note is designed to retrieve WAVE files directly by clicking sound buttons. It means that a reader can listen to the narration by clicking on a sound button on a page screen. However, when a reader clicks on a sound button to retrieve an MPEG file, an audio retrieval menu box appears over the page by hiding the page screen before hearing the narration. Reading and listening to a story while watching it becomes a little ineffective using this method.

Recording with a high-quality sound file was rather difficult for this group last year in 1999 partly because our computer system was not particularly designed for this purpose and the author was not familiar with technical aspects of recording and retrieving sound for the project. This is one area which must be improved if we want to have our stories read aloud by the students.

8. Showing the results

To finish the project, students share their writing with others. Unfortunately, in 1999, the students could not finish recording the narration because of technical problems but we were able to show eight different computerized children's books at the fall festival.

Three stories created by the students in 1998 were later converted into HTML format by Professor Yoden, the designer/developer of Study Note, and are now shown

in the college web site <http://www.kasei.ac.jp/eco/www/db/n00004a/index.htm>.

Figure 1. Sample Pages Created by the Students Using "Study Note" - 1998

Some Computer Problems

Because of hardware and software changes which often occur without prior notification, some of the routine procedures may be lost. For example, by the time the students were ready to record the narration earlier in 1999, the author found that the new computer system did not have the same sound recording software which had been used in the previous year. A different program was downloaded later for our group, and the teacher had to relearn it. If you are not a computer expert but nonetheless wish to try various activities using computers, you will likely need help from others in your institution. It is therefore very important to have a good working relationship with the busy technical experts in your department.

Generally, sounds and graphics tend to use up a great deal of computer space, and

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a majority of trouble comes from these two areas. For example in 1996, the students used more than the file size allotted by the authoring software which we were using at that time by creating beautiful graphics, and we had to switch to Visual Basic to run the story without losing what they had created. In 1999, we encountered a problem in recording and retrieving sound files. However, students can learn a great deal by practicing reading aloud in English before the actual recording and therefore, this author really hopes to be able to solve this problem with the help of our department's computer experts.

Conclusion

By observing how the students work to make their own stories, the author concludes that computer use is quite effective in motivating students in language learning, much more so than it was anticipated when the children's story writing project started in 1996. In fact, this year, in the fifth year of this writing project, the students are becoming more active and creative, and less fearful of experimenting with both computers and the contents of their writing.

This result is largely due to the fact that a simple material such as children's story writing has been chosen to motivate students with the help of appropriate software which simplifies technical procedures for students. Needless to say, the role of the teacher and technical support staff are crucially important in encouraging students to maintain their motivation and interest in learning English through this kind of project.

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Footnotes

[1] Groupware enables a group of users on a network to collaborate on a project. It may provide services for communication, collaborative document development, scheduling and tracking. Documents may include text, images, or other forms of information (Microsoft Computer Dictionary, 1999).

[2] Study Note was originally developed by Professors Kazuhiko Nakayama and Yoshinori Higashibara (when they were at the University of Tsukuba) and Professors Yoshihiko Yoden and Kazuo Yamanoi (of *Joho-shori-ka* (Information Science Department), Junior College Division, Tokyo Kasei Gakuin Tsukuba Women's University), in collaboration with Sharp System Products.

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